

Imagine a summer's day without the song of a bird...

THERE is a sign in the Bronx Zoo which reads: 'You are looking at the most dangerous animal in the world. Alone of all animals it can exterminate (and has) entire species.'

The sign hangs over a mirror.

Now, for the first time, we can see the truth of that in actual figures.

In the year 1600 there were living on the earth 4,226 species of mammals and 8,684 species of birds. Since then 36 of the mammal and 94 of the bird species have become extinct—one-hundredth of the world's higher animals.

These figures have been calculated by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and are published in *The Red Book* (Collins 70s.).

But red stands for danger. It is the numbers on the danger list now that are really frightening: 120 mammal species and 187 bird species are on the verge of joining the others in oblivion.

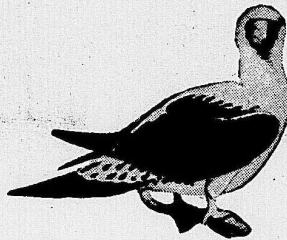
Their pictures gaze at you from this handsome book—a gallery of the beautiful, the strange and, one fears, the doomed forms of life that homo sapiens has been too pushing and too busy to consider.

Exotic

Because only a quarter of extinct species have died out naturally. The rest owe it to man, as a hunter or a disrupter of their habitat.

Many are exotic and remote creatures like the Californian Condor, with a nearly ten-foot wingspan, of which there are only about 20 left alive; or the dragons (super-lizards) of Indonesia, the Galapagos Island turtles, the enormous monkey-eating eagle and the elegant and delightful gannet called Abbott's Booby of Christmas Island.

But many are shockingly familiar. The Blue Whale (probably no more than 600 left) and all its relatives are still being over-hunted to the extinction point with the aid of helicopters, radar, electric harpoons and factory ships.



The tiger... the Abbott's Booby gannet... the Californian condor... Can we stop doomsday dawning for them?

BY PETER LEWIS

The polar bear (about 12,000 left) is still menaced by hunting from aircraft.

The Indian rhinoceros is down to 740, the African little better, the orang-utan (5,000) and the Indian lion (162 last year) are both dwindling as their forest homes shrink from felling. Even the tiger, good God, is declining fast and all types except the Bengal tiger are on the list.

The news is not all bad. Some of the rarest animals are heavily protected by Governments. Several have been saved at the last gasp by zoologists who hand-reared survivors or transplanted specimens (sometimes from zoos) to renew the stock.

All conservationists of the

Survival Service Commission have had their own *Red Book* for some years. Now it is being issued to the public, with all the royalties going to the cause—and the cause needs it.

As James Fisher, the British ornithologist, who is one of the authors, told me: 'The real message of *The Red Book* is that since Stone Age Man developed into Shot-Gun Man he has trebled the extermination rate of species from what it was in the normal course of evolution. We've got to stop this happening by creating an informed public opinion.'

There are, happily, no British animals in *The Red Book* (except the St. Kilda wren whose tiny population is as safe as sea and rock can make it).

But a different sort of alarm is sounded this week for the British Isles by the naturalist Brian Vesey Fitzgerald in a book, *The Vanishing Wild Life of Britain* (MacGibbon and Kee 36s.).

Threats

He peers into the future of the common species we all take for granted and shows that, unless we are much more careful than at present, Britain could be left with a fauna consisting of rats and mice, some garden birds and a horde of insects that have become immune to pesticides.

The threats our countryside faces are the expanding population eating up the land, the destruction of hedgerows for

big-scale farming, the spraying of crops and weeds with toxic chemicals and water pollution.

All Nature is interconnected. Spray a weed with poison and you kill the insects that live on it, which drives away birds that live on the insects, which affects the birds and animals that live on those birds. That is what we have been doing lately.

It is called a food-chain and the chemical you put in at the bottom end, on the corn or the weeds, accumulates at each link until it reaches the upper end of the chain—the birds of prey. That is why there are no sparrowhawks any more.

The peregrine falcons, the kestrels, the golden eagles, the buzzards, all went the same way — they were poisoned, laid infertile eggs or produced eggshells so thin that they broke when the bird sat on them.

What about common song birds? The British Trust for Ornithology has kept a census since 1961. What they found was this. The dreadful winter of 1962-3, coming on top of the worst years for heavy chemical spraying,

Illustrations from *The Red Book*

wiped out half or more of many of our resident bird populations.

Since then a lot of birds are down in numbers—the lapwing, yellowhammer, wagtail, bunting, green woodpecker. Others are recovering spectacularly — the chaffinch and the wren—but it has taken a long time. The commonest farmland birds—in order, the blackbird, skylark, chaffinch, hedge sparrow, robin—are all steady or slowly increasing.

But they face a new hazard, the grubbing out of hedgerows to make fields of 40 acres or more for the efficient use of big farm machinery.

Happily, Britain also breeds naturalists and there is a sizeable counter-attack. National Parks and nature reserves cover 10 p.c. of the landscape.

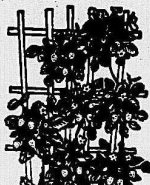
Farmers are voluntarily limiting the use of dangerous pesticides. Some are now making up for lost hedges by leaving the corners of fields, where the big machines can't turn, as spinneys for wildlife.

And it is nice to know that three pairs of ospreys are breeding now at secret addresses in Scotland and one spare male had built a nest but had not found a mate yet, poor chap.

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CIGARS & WHIFFS

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Peter Lewis.

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